

Christmas Appeal 2017



Young students in the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon prefer the practical side to their electronics course. The popular nine-month course offers around 20 students the chance to learn the skills they need to find work in an extremely tight employment market. While the people may live in appalling conditions, DSPR offers education from preschool through to a vocational training programme for school graduates or dropouts and older refugees wanting to learn to read and write. In its centres, it provides community and the wrap around support services that help refugees of all ages find hope for the future. The Christmas Appeal will support DSPR Lebanon in its work with Palestinian and Syrian refugees.

OUR STORY IS OUR FUTURE

One of 12 camps run by the United Nations in Lebanon, the Shatila Refugee Camp was established in 1949 to accommodate refugees fleeing northern Palestine. More than 9,842 Palestinian refugees have made their homes in damp and overcrowded conditions. Tall buildings are mixed with old slums. Dangerous electric wires crisscross between housing blocks riddled with bullet holes. Many drains are open and the inadequate sewerage system makes for poor environmental health.

In one small two storey building on the edge of the camp, the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees has run literacy and vocational training for Palestinians of all ages since 1951. While the living conditions might be appalling, the Sabra Centre is a place of hope and light. Out of the centre, DSPR runs vocational training in electronics, computers, beauty skills and hairdressing as well as workshops and lectures on issues like hygiene, family planning and violence in the home. Last year 139 children attended its very popular preschool and another 55 benefited from the extra tuition provided for school age children. The library is well used. A newly established programme for older refugees is improving their mental health and literacy skills.

The Sabra Centre is more than its educational programme as director Sylvia Haddad found out when she was asked by the local church to close it down because of the lack of funding. When a group of people appeared at her door with a petition asking what right did she have to close a centre that had served their community and their children for so many years. In her heart, she knew they were right so she resigned her job as the English teacher at the Lebanese American University.



Photo: Electronic Intifada

Gaining entry to the electronics course has helped most graduates into a better earning path. Some of its early graduates played key roles in setting up Lebanon's first television station. Established as a five year course in 1964, it has gradually reduced to nine months with the falling education standards in Palestinian schools.

Over the years, the course has adapted to new technology. In addition to repairing electronics and household equipment, students learn to install satellite dishes and fix cell phones.

Mohammed Darraj graduated from the programme in 2009. His father died shortly after he started the programme, leaving him as the eldest child grieving and responsible for the family. Needing money, he started working as an electrician in the evenings. When he graduated, he bid successfully for jobs to install electricity in houses and other buildings. Now he is able to offer jobs to other graduates. "I insisted on being honest, truthful and faithful, focusing on improving my work," he said.

In Lebanon, young Syrian and Palestinian students are finding support to face trauma. Stronger because of the encouragement and training from DSPR, they are turning the harshness of everyday existence into the energy they need to create a new future.

Donations to the Christmas Appeal will train refugees and give them the resources they need to improve their livelihoods and become more resilient.

BACKGROUND ON LEBANON

Lebanon is straining to host more than 1.5 million refugees who arrived before the country closed its borders last year. The economy has collapsed and the government is struggling to cope. Tensions between the new arrivals, existing Palestinian refugees and 1.5 million Lebanese living in poverty put pressure on the limited resources

Despite residing in Lebanon for over 50 years, Palestinian refugees cannot become citizens or get Lebanese identity cards. This means they cannot own property and are barred from working in at least 70 occupations and professions. Some find work as cleaners or labourers but most are largely dependent on UN rations.

DEPARTMENT OF SERVICE TO PALESTINIAN REFUGEES LEBANON



Refugee children enjoy learning in Sabra's bright kindergarten. ACT Alliance/Paul Jeffrey

DSPR Lebanon runs four centres altogether offering kindergartens, tutoring centres, vocational training programmes and children's camps that include sports, choir, art classes and drama. The centres provide cash assistance to new refugees as funds allow. More programmes offer extra tuition, homework support, English and maths, psychosocial support for refugee students in other centres. At their farm in Tyre, Palestinian and Syrian refugees can learn agricultural skills while they work the land. Teaching cultural traditions keeps alive their identity as Palestinians and Syrians.

For the last four years, the Sidon Centre has organised groups of secondary students to return to Syria to sit their brevet and baccalaureate exams in Damascus. Careful negotiations with the Lebanese government guarantee their right to return after the exams, something denied other refugees leaving the country. Every year students accompanied by staff head home to sit these exams with the assurance of safe passage back to Lebanon.

According to Sylvia, young men are vulnerable to extremist teachings. Giving them skills and an opportunity to earn money keeps them safe. In the same way, the education programme helps keep young women from being married at 16.

The classroom is the entry point to a better future. After nearly 70 years of work with refugees, DSPR education is a ticket of hope and dignity. By drawing out the skills of the refugees themselves, they support a network of volunteer teachers and tutors to run the educational programmes.

Working together with people from the communities, we make hope our Christmas story.